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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT Wednesday, October 5, 1938

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "WILL THE CHESTNUT COME BACK?" Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Among the questions listeners are sure to ask at this time of year is the familiar one about the dead but not forgotten chestnut tree.

"Will the chestnut ever come back?" they ask again and again. And they inquire whether the scientists have any hope at all of finding a cure for the chestnut blight. Probably no tree tragedy has brought forth more sympathy and interest than the chestnut's fate.

Listeners write that they remember when the American chestnut flourished from the Atlantic to the Mississippi and from Canada to North Carolina. They recall that the chestnut tree often reached a height of 100 feet and a ripe old age of 600 years. They remember when every good builder liked to put strong handsome solid chestnut doors in hourses, as well as to use chestnut for woodwork; when this wood was valued for telephone poles and mine props especially because it was durable, straight, even in size, had no knots and was easy to split. But what people like to remember most of all was chestnutting expeditions in the fall--one of the great treats of the year for children and grown-ups alike.

Well, today through the forests where the chestnuts once grew, you can see scattered grey skeletons with occasionally a little scrubby growth struggling up from the old roots. You know the story; almost everybody does. A plague from Asia came into this country--a fatal fungus disease of chestnut trees. The disease was first identified here in 1904. Since then it has systematically destroyed our chestnuts. Only a few stands are now left in the Southern Appalachian Mountains and the deadly blight has started on them, too. No quarantine or other method of preventing the spread of the blight was possible because the fungus was light enough to be carried by the wind.

Listeners often ask whether the shoots that continue to come up from the roots of the old dead chestnuts may not someday replace the old trees. The scientists think it is unlikely. Because the roots of the chestnut are fairly resistant to the blight, they keep on sending up shoots even though the trunk and branches have been dead for years. But these shoots seldom live long. Sooner or later the blight attacks them, too. Instead of keeping the chestnut alive, they actually are doing more toward keeping the blight alive by providing it with something to live on.

As for a cure or remedy for a tree already afflicted with blight, nothing tried so far has given the least help.

But sometimes an adopted child can take the place of an own child who has died. The scientists hope this may be the case with the chestnut. They hope that Japanese and Chinese chestnuts which resist blight may one day fill some of the gaps in the forests left by our native trees.

In 1927 the Department of Agriculture sent a plant explorer to Asia in search of promising blight-resistant chestnuts. Mr. R. Kent Beattie of the Bureau of Plant Industry spent three years in the forest of Japan, Korea and Formosa collecting chestnuts. He sent back some 250 bushels of chestnuts of native strains as well as many from cultivated varieties, and he arranged for further shipments from far corners of China, Japan and Korea. Some 264 thousand seedlings from these foreign chestnuts have been planted, a number of them in the Southern Appalachian region. These are the adopted children that the scientists hope may take the place of our lost trees.

Mr. Beattie says it is too soon to know yet how successful these trees will be. It will take 15 or 20 years yet before we'll know. But their progress in the Southern Appalachian regions is promising. To be sure a good many have died from drought and from being eaten by rodents and grazing animals as well as from being planted in unfavorable locations. But those that were planted under conditions that suited our own chestnuts have been thriving if they also have had space to grow. In general, the Asiatic chestnuts will survive where other native hardwood seedlings like the tulip poplar, ash, hickory, or oak appear naturally. But on hot, eroded or grassy ground, they don't last long.

The chestnut tree that may eventually prove best will probably be a cross between the American and Asiatic types. Plant breeders are now working to combine the valuable qualities of both these types in one. The American chestnut tree is hardier and more erect than the Asiatic while the Asiatic is more blight-resistant and some have larger nuts. Since 1925 the Department of Agriculture has produced and grown more than 3 thousand hybrid trees. The earliest of these have already begun to bear nuts. These hybrids have descended from various strains and varieties of American chestnut, from both native tree and shrub chinquapins, the Chinese chestnut, Chinese timber and dwarf chinquapins, and various wild and cultivated forms of Japanese chestnut.

Let's hope that all this chestnut breeding work may mean that our grandchildren will go chestnutting on crisp bright autumn days just as we once did.

P.S. Listeners who would like to plant some of these Oriental chestnut trees on their own property may be interested to know that private nurseries are now handling these trees.

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